



# Calling in BACKUP

With myriad qualified practitioners available to treat your horse's back, how do you decide which will benefit him most? Joanna Ryan investigates

**R**efusing fences, biting when you do up the girth, fidgeting at the mounting block – these are just three of a huge number of signs your horse might be suffering from a back problem.

Recognising the issue and putting it right is not only vital for the animal's well-being, but also for rider and handler safety.

Manipulation therapies such as physio, chiropractic, osteopathy and sports massage all exist to help cure problems with the musculoskeletal system. This encompasses the bones, muscle, cartilage, tendons, ligaments, joints and other connective tissue.

But with such a range of treatment options, who should be your first port of call if your horse seems out of sorts?

Whatever the situation, the initial person you should contact is your vet. By law, all manipulation therapists can only work with veterinary referral or consent.

"The type of therapy most appropriate depends on the nature of the problem and, as ever for successful treatment, accurate diagnosis is a prerequisite," says vet Linda Belton, of The George Equine Clinic in Wiltshire. "I advise owners only to use qualified physical therapists who work in communication with vets."

"Back trouble may be primary or secondary, commonly to a hind-limb problem," she continues. "Warning signs may be a change in behaviour when being saddled, mounted or groomed, or a drop in performance."

"After time, you may see asymmetry of the muscles or a decrease in topline musculing due to a change in gait. If the problem is secondary to a limb issue, your horse might also be lame."

From post-injury recovery and performance problems to behaviour changes and neurological conditions, the range of issues manipulation therapists can treat is vast. Read on to find out how they could help your horse.

## Physiotherapy

Physiotherapists see movement as central to well-being.

They combine a knowledge of anatomy and biomechanics, physiology and pathology (the study of disease) with a range of physical techniques.

Their aim is to restore the mobility of joints and muscles to aid recovery from injury, improve health and boost performance.

### How does it work?

Practitioners work to return movement and function to as near as normal as possible by using:

- Hands-on techniques such as manipulation, massage, trigger-point release (easing knots in muscles) and stretching;
- Electrotherapy such as ultrasound, pulsed electromagnetic therapy and laser;
- Exercise, such as hydrotherapy and core stability work.



Massage can help restore muscle mobility



Ultrasound is one of many techniques used

### What can it help?

Physiotherapists deal with a variety of musculoskeletal problems, such as:

- Orthopaedic disorders (the spine and joints);
- Neurological conditions;
- General muscular, joint and spinal pain and injuries;
- Performance issues or enhancement.

Stafford-based chartered veterinary physio Sue Palmer ([www.holistichorsehelp.com](http://www.holistichorsehelp.com)) says her practice is largely based around resolving behavioural concerns, improving performance and maintaining comfort and mobility.

"Recent cases include horses who have started to stop at fences, nap or buck going into canter, as well as one recovering from spine surgery and another on box rest," she says.

### Who does it?

By law, physiotherapists can treat an animal providing a vet has diagnosed the condition and decided it should be treated by physiotherapy under his or her direction.

Anyone can call themselves a 'veterinary physiotherapist' or an 'animal physiotherapist', as these titles are not protected by law.

However, 'chartered physiotherapist' is protected and can only be used by those who have achieved a high level of physiotherapy training in the human field. They may undergo further study if they wish to work on animals.

The Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy ([www.acpat.org](http://www.acpat.org)) is a good place to find a qualified practitioner. ➔

## Osteopathy

The principle of osteopathy is to encourage the body to heal itself.

"Pain and disability can arise from abnormalities in the way the body functions after a trauma or through wear and tear, inflammation or infection," explains osteopath Alison Tyler, who runs Brookend Osteopaths



Osteopathy can help reduce tension and increase mobility

(www.brookendosteopaths.com), based in Lichfield, Staffordshire.

"These changes to the way the body works produce dysfunction in the muscles and connective tissue, which affects the mechanics of groups of joints.

"This may result in compensatory patterns in the musculoskeletal system, changing the way the animal moves. Osteopathy aims to remove the primary dysfunction and aid the normalisation of the compensatory pattern."

### How does it work?

Osteopaths use a well-developed sense of touch, physical manipulation, stretching and massage to increase the mobility of joints, relieve muscle tension, enhance the blood and nerve supply to tissues and help the body's own healing mechanisms. Treatments include:

- Soft-tissue massage;
- Mobilisation;
- Manipulation;
- Functional osteopathy, which involves mobilising restrictions and creating a self-awareness within nervous tissue, allowing it to be repositioned or to relax;
- Cranial osteopathy – a subtle type of treatment that encourages the release

of stresses and tensions throughout the body, including the head.

### What can it help?

It can assist a variety of issues, including back pain, repetitive strain, arthritis and sports injuries.

Alison says: "Recently, I have treated horses for uncharacteristic changes in behaviour, difficulty relaxing in ridden work and reluctance to go forwards, as well as animals recovering from box rest and for the maintenance of mobility."

### Who does it?

All osteopaths in the UK are regulated by the General Osteopathic Council (www.osteopathy.org.uk). They have to renew their registration each year and get an annual licence to work.

Practitioners must undergo at least four years of education and training on humans, then an additional year to treat animals.

## Chiropractic

Chiropractic is a holistic approach to many health and performance problems of the horse.

It is a health-care system based on movement and symmetry, but does not replace traditional veterinary medicine.

"Chiropractors focus on the health and correct movement of all joints, but especially the proper functioning of the spine," says Buckinghamshire-based chiropractor Juliet Lock (www.the-practice-equine.com).

"The spinal column consists of bones, ligaments, tendons, muscles and, most importantly, nerves.

"Nothing can function without a nerve supply. Every movement, from the swish of a tail to the refined precision of piaffe, is made possible by nerves instructing muscles to function.

"There are more than 175 joints in the horse's spine. Moving properly, these joints allow for a flexible, happy and healthy animal. Moving improperly or not at all, these restricted joints can make a horse stiff or painful."

Restrictions can be caused by things such as trauma, conformation faults, a change in workload, poorly fitted tack or an asymmetrically sitting rider.

Slight restriction tends to cause a loss of performance; a greater degree may lead to pain.

### How does it work?

Chiropractors assess the range of movement of individual joints in the spine, pelvis and limbs, and feel for changes in the surrounding soft tissue.

They apply a controlled, specific, high-speed, low-force adjustment to the restricted joint at the correct angle of the joint plane – a technique only used by chiropractors.

This adjustment restores normal movement to a joint and initiates a nerve reflex that releases the muscle spasm and restores joint function.

Chiropractors may also recommend exercises and use soft-tissue techniques and electrotherapy where appropriate.



Chiropractors focus on the health and correct movement of joints

### What can it help?

As with other therapies, chiropractic can help with a range of issues.

Signs of a problem may include a loss of performance, or difficulty with lateral work, engagement or of working to a level achieved previously.

Other signs may be behavioural changes such as biting or bucking. When riding, you may feel one rein is suddenly better than the other or that the horse is asymmetrical.

### Who does it?

A chiropractor will have done five years' training on humans prior to a further

## Sports massage

This therapy works the musculoskeletal system and triggers the body's natural ability to heal itself.

"A horse's muscular system accounts for more than 60 per cent of its body weight," says Berkshire-based sports massage therapist Sarah Matthews (www.equinemassageberkshire.com).

"Therefore, the function and dysfunction of muscles can have profound consequences.

"Muscle dysfunction may be passed to neighbouring muscle groups. For example, shoulder tension can be transmitted to the muscles of the forearm, which places strain on the lower leg.

"A small muscle injury can take up to 90 days to be apparent, by which time it may have become more serious. Early treatment will enhance performance and may help prevent problems."

### How does it work?

The physical act of muscle massage increases the tissue temperature. Practitioners use various massage techniques that enhance circulation. This aids waste/debris removal (lactic acid and so on) and reduces local pressure, tension and pain, in turn improving the function of the muscles and joints and helping with relaxation and recovery.

Stretching techniques increase the range of motion of joints and soft tissue, which will assist coordination and preparation for work.

"I read the horse's expression and reaction for indications of pain," says Sarah. "I also look for signs of relief like licking, chewing and yawning, which tell me the parasympathetic nervous system [part of the fight-or-flight response] is being stimulated."



Massage helps the body to heal itself

### What can it help?

Sports massage can benefit equines by:

- Aiding strength and suppleness;
- Preventing muscle wastage and enhancing tissue repair;
- Improving muscle tone;
- Relaxing muscle spasms;
- Enhancing circulation.

### Who does it?

The Equine Sports Massage Association (www.equinemassageassociation.co.uk) is a good place to find a practitioner.

## 'Chiropractic saved my horse's life'

Terri Hardy bought Tubbertoby Cruiser ('Cruise'), a four-year-old Connemara gelding, in October last year. He settled in well, but soon it became clear something was wrong.

"In early December, over a couple of days, he changed from being lovely and gentle to pinning his ears back, swishing his tail and kicking out if I tried to get near," says Terri.

"I'd had his teeth and saddle checked when I bought him and was very concerned.

"I called a vet I knew was in the area, though she wasn't from my normal practice. When she arrived, she couldn't get near Cruise.

"She told me the problem wasn't pain-related and that I had three options: send him to a behaviourist, give him away as a dangerous animal or put him down. I was devastated.

"A friend suggested I contact a chiropractor, so I obtained permission from my usual vet.

"When the chiropractor arrived, Cruise wouldn't let her get close. But with a little reassurance and perseverance she was able to isolate the problem to his shoulder.

"He had very little movement in his shoulder blade and a deep



Cruise had a problem in his shoulder

muscle spasm appeared to be aggravating a nerve.

"After this session – during which the chiropractor mostly worked on his neck, shoulder and legs – Cruise seemed happier. After more treatment five days later, he started to relax.

"I also asked an ACPAT-registered physiotherapist to look at him, again with veterinary permission. She showed me stretches and exercises to practise.

"Now, I am doing groundwork with Cruise to build his confidence and I hope to get back on shortly.

"I cannot thank the physio and chiropractor enough. Without them, Cruise might not be alive today." ■

Case Study